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ABSTRACT

Drawing on research that supports the importance of parental involvement for children's school success, a study evaluated a model parent development center in a school setting. The mission of the three-year study was to create a parent education initiative to support parents in their parenting role. This paper begins with an introduction to the problems parents face, followed by: (1) a description of the methods used to choose the school setting for developing the model and the strategy for implementation; (2) a summary list of early successes and challenges faced by those implementing the model; and (3) a report of the model's current status and future plans. The second half of the paper contains specific information on the school-based center for parent growth and development instituted at the Latin School of Chicago. This section presents a background and mission statement for development of the parent education initiative. Specific goals and how these goals will be achieved are listed, and a summary of the program over its 3-year evolution is presented along with some conclusions and ideas for future investigation. (SD)

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The Challenge of Developing a School Based Center for Parent Growth and Development in a JK-12 School

A poster presentation prepared for the
Annual Conference of the National Conference on Family Relations
November 14, 1998

by Dana McDermott Murphy, Ph.D., C.F.L.E.
and Joy F. Segal, Ph.D., C.F.L.E.

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Introduction

Anyone trying to convince schools to commit to a permanent place in the school for parent education and support faces a challenge. Often in our competitive society things are seen in terms of a zero sum. Money, resources and energy for parents as they too learn and grow might be hard to justify in schools that think children need more computers, supplies,... more of everything but not necessarily parents. While school administrators have ample evidence of the importance of parent involvement for children's school success, they often view this in terms of the traditional forms of involvement such as fund raising, help with homework or school projects. Other resources such as a center for parent growth and development for parents and teachers, a parent educator on staff permanently , parent-teacher study groups, might seem less essential to the traditional mission of schools to educate children.

Methods

Choosing the right school setting for developing the model

Though we* had experience in many schools and believe a parent development center is needed in all school settings, we began our first model project in a highly acclaimed private school with a philosophical commitment to life long learning. The school has a successful adult education program in place. The school's new long range plan included a commitment to preparing students to adapt to a changing world and supporting their parents also. They do this through their expanding and increasingly diverse curriculum , many opportunities to study abroad, accelerated science and technology programs, a commitment to recruiting a diverse student body and faculty and many community outreach initiatives. A three year grant from a private funder committed to the concept of a school based parent center and to this school in particular allowed us to develop the model without taking funds from other school initiatives.

Choosing a strategy for implementation

• I did not come in with answers. We had prepared a "draft of a mission statement." (See attached statement and a brief summary of our efforts thus far) I encouraged others to help us define the center.

•I then did focus groups with parents of all grades to help us determine how to begin to prioritize and achieve agreed upon goals. The amazing thing is that our mission statement assumptions were accepted by administrators and parents. They may not have realized what it might mean in terms of a paradigm shift changing the way schools look at parents, but they easily accepted the positive principles as desireable.

•I then visited school staff formally and informally. This low key approach of evolving a center by the Jeffersonian approach of checking with constituencies was well received and enhanced ownership.

• After meeting everyone I began by attending already established parent meetings as a guest speaker, facilitator or resource. Our 1997 NCFR didactic seminar details this process. I was seen not as an "in and out sage on the stage" but rather as an available resource person at the school to assist parents in developing grade specific as well as school wide activities to educate and support parents.

•Meanwhile, we analyzed the focus groups and felt that some unique ways to reach this well educated group of parents was through "conversations." I sponsored book groups, one on one consultations on child development or child rearing issues and obtained a physical place for the parent initiative.

•I worked with school staff to help with communications via brochures, occasional newsletters and school web site announcements. With the latter I was and continue to be able to easily remind faculty and staff of offerings and to try to involve them more both as teachers and as parents.

Early successes and challenges

• A <u>success:</u> In the first year parents attended presentations and book groups in large numbers. Part of this had to do with the novelty of a University professor on staff offering resources to parents.

•A <u>challenge</u>: Unfortunately when some parents did not get quick answers to solve problems, and didn't see me as a direct line to the headmaster to effect quick and dramatic change numbers declined slightly. When we were no longer a novelty and many events were scheduled numbers decreased slightly.

•A <u>success</u> was that whenever I did speak with faculty and staff they frequently became very

*While both of us develop the model only D. Murphy coordinates the School Program on site

excited regarding the possibilities of collaborations e.g. parents supporting affective education initiatives .

•A challenge was the fact that there were competing urgencies and many great ideas were not pursued due to time constraints. I was not yet part of any regular faculty or staff planning meetings.

•A success was that I could decide on my own which components of the broad mission statement to develop. I therefore worked with staff most interested in our model and most supportive of our efforts.

•A challenge was that sometimes these same people who were the most interested were either too over-committed or not in a position to make decisions that could free up more time for collaborations.

•A success was that school counselors got the concept quickly. They saw where their work with a particular child and my work with the child's parents would allow for a more effective intervention.

•A challenge was for the counselors to get parents to distinguish between the developmental or child-rearing information I could provide and the additional need those parents and children might have to see a family therapist. Many families could not or would not make the commitment to see so many people.

•A success was that when I was seen as the parent educator, I could provide the parents with the developmental information and a place to reflect on how the events were affecting them .I could help them decide the best strategy which often involved helping them choose interventions like family therapy.

• A challenge is to get parents and staff to understand the different training and backgrounds of a parent educator, a teacher, a school counselor, a family therapist, etc .

•A success was that I built in time and with the help of graduate interns in our Family Studies Program I was able to document and analyze each event in terms of both process and outcomes. This helped in terms of planning future activities and in terms of model development.

•A challenge is that this takes time away from additional programming.

•A success has been with my own broad based knowledge as a CFLE still working with parents to continue to bring in speakers. I am then there to do follow up as well but they hear different views.

•A challenge is to keep initial parents coming back once they have felt served.

• A success has been to continually introduce new good books in parenting or related subjects to keep those parents coming and recruit others. I still get more mothers than fathers coming.

•A challenge is to find ways of reaching those parents who never come. I have tried by sending all parents a summary of some of our most successful sessions around topics such as family communication and peer friendships e.g.. Thus, I am reaching all parents and sharing some of our discussions in hopes of getting them thinking and perhaps feeling connected in some way to our efforts.

•A success is in getting parents once they come to an event to find ways to connect to other parents. My goal is to help parents find ways to support each other. Last year a group of JK parents came to my events and decided to start a support group that met regularly to stay connected through the school years. They now invite me to discussions and meetings.

•A challenge has been to find enough time to respond to parent interests and still put in more time exploring some teacher suggestions. Last year I did less programming and joined a group of 19 teachers and administrators discussing excellence in teaching. While I was there to represent parents I was seen as a fellow teacher and was able to share with the group my beliefs about the skills involved in both excellent parenting and teaching. I then also sponsored meetings between this group and parents on the topic. _ _

•A success has been to also be asked to join a group of staff re-examining the affective education curriculum for students from JK-12. My role is to both share my expertise as a CFLE and child psychologist but also to suggest ways to time parent events so that parents can support teacher efforts.

•A challenge is to do all of this on the 3 days/week schedule the grant allows.

Current status, reflections and future plans

We have found that a program that speaks to the complexity of parenting in these times will not necessarily be easy to prove successful There is not a direct and easy relationship between reflecting on such topics as the impact of television on our children's conceptions of family communication or the impact of a competitive society on a parent's attempts to teach values such as caring. We do feel that in three short years while we only begin to analyze the rich qualitative data on the process of model development that our concept is taking hold. The school has joined with the funder to share the program expenses. Parents in having time and a place to reflect on their important parenting role are speaking more about the school finding time for teachers to reflect more on their role. We are being asked by other schools to guide them to develop parent centers. We gladly accept the challenge.

A SCHOOL BASED CENTER FOR PARENT GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

At the Latin School of Chicago- presented by Dana McDermott-Murphy, Ph.D., C.F.L.E.

Background: Why a center?

While there is evidence that parenting is complex and that parents have the potential and need to learn and grow as they adapt to their growing child(ren), there are few parent programs that are developed with this in mind. "Sage on the stage" type presentations, fund raising parent tasks, take home parent-student academic activities and parent-teacher conferences at report card time seem the norm. The school remains a place where many parents still feel out of place and often part of the problem. Themes of parent programs often focus on development of skills to produce a smarter or better behaved child. Because of 1) our current understanding and beliefs about parent's and children's needs 2) our ever increasing knowledge of how parents think (I. Sigel et al.1992, G. Holden, 1995; R. Kegan, 1996) and 3) all the Social and cultural contextual factors affecting parents' behaviors and sense of competence, confidence and satisfaction, we feel there should be a center for parent growth and development in every school.

The Mission statement guides our development

We would like to share the mission statement of the "parent education initiative" begun in the fall of 1995 as a three year model development grant in an independent JK-12 school in an urban environment.

Mission Statement of the Parent Education Initiative

We seek to collaborate with and support parents in their important role at a time when they seem not to be getting the support they need in society. **To achieve this goal, we are committed to:**

- Encouraging a parent community even more competent, confident and satisfied in their effectiveness with their children, family and community
- Making a clear commitment to our belief in the lifelong process of learning and growing for parents as well as children
- Creating an environment that promotes opportunities for greater parental growth, self-understanding and awareness
- Addressing the fact that we are a diverse parent community that respects cultural differences and still appreciates the common parenting experiences that bring us together
- Enhancing parent-child-school-community relationships
- Providing support for teachers and staff with their own parenting family concerns
- Strengthening the partnership between parents, teachers and staff

We will fulfill these goals by:

- Consulting with representatives of the Latin School staff and parent community to identify areas of concern
- Designing and delivering innovative programming and learning opportunities tailored to the specific needs of the Latin School parent and family community
- Working to enhance more effective parent-teacher communications and collaborations
- Integrating current parenting programs/activities into a coherent whole
- Providing information to help teachers and staff better understand key issues challenging parents and families in the twenty-first century

Parents define the center

Seven focus groups for parents (N=39) representing every grade and many individual meetings with parents (N=46) representing organizations within the school helped determine the needed content, timing, structure, and pedagogy of the parent initiative. Parents were primarily concerned with:

- **What?** Having a place where they could discuss their concerns and needs without having school faculty and staff present. Emphasis was on a "place of one's own" within a learning environment.
- A PEI coordinator to serve as a "resource" at already established parent meetings where parents in leadership roles felt they had not in the past profited from the group experience as participants because they were expected to be "group leaders" having the task of keeping discussion non-competitive.
- The PEI coordinator could help parents understand their "role" with children and teachers/staff. Part of this was related to understanding children's developmental needs. She could also help them understand the changing social context in which they were trying to parent effectively.

  In terms of <u>content</u>, parents of <u>lower school</u> children were concerned about the impact of other parent's and teacher's values, and the impact of classmate's behaviors on their own children. They were also concerned about academic pressures to compete or over-scheduling of activities.

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- Parents of middle school children seemed as confused as middle school children were said to be. They were seeking understanding of the parent role in homework within a school with high expectations for children. They were also concerned about when to intervene in terms of problems with their children's friendships. As they began to doubt their own parenting they needed a place where parents with similar values could support them. Their range of emotions paralleled those of their children.
- Parents of upper school children worried about curfews, the gray areas with teens where there are no simple answers, academic and social pressures, and couple's heated arguments over teens. While discouraged by teens to talk with other parents they felt the need to do so even more than before. Some parents saw teachers in the higher grades as less accessible to parents and as not thinking parents have a legitimate role in helping when problems arose. They sought assurance from the PEI that as their children matured their relationship with them was not ending but only hopefully changing.
- Alumnae parents were wanting help in redefining their role with young adult children and family and using the school to maintain a needed supportive community during this transition.
- **When?** Parents liked the idea of early morning meetings when children arrived at school or lunch meetings. For fathers and mothers working full time either 7:15 meetings in the morning or evening worked best. Often non-custodial parents communicated via email and phone at varied hours.
- **How?** While parents were reluctant to come to a meeting on a very serious issue e.g. anorexia or drug abuse for fear of being judged failures they would be open to attending a "book group" on the topic e.g. Reviving Ophelia. Parents also would prefer sessions where the emphasis was on "conversations" as opposed to lectures. Parents also came by the office for drop in hours or one on one meetings. Over the years as a good level of trust was established teachers and staff also shared many parenting challenges and asked for resources. On topics like the effect of children on fathers, teachers and staff joined parents to discuss their common experiences, needs and hopes for their father-child relationships. On certain topics e.g. "caring in a competitive world" parents read materials students were reading and then invited students in to share their ideas and feelings regarding the topic.

Programs and structure evolve: A three year review

In three years the parent education initiative has quietly become institutionalized. Now it is expected that a parent educator is always available as a resource to the entire Latin community from the bookkeeper needing help with a new foster child to a teacher thinking about adoption to a parent worrying about the effect of her father's death on her young son. The PEI coordinator works to support parents in ongoing efforts to support each other, attends parent and teacher meetings as a resource, writes regular pieces in the parent school newsletters, is part of the team of school principal-counselor-learning assistance staff when planning or intervening for an individual child/family. Speakers are brought into help us in our search for understanding. The PEI coordinator is there long after the speaker has left to help parents integrate the new information into their lives. Dr. Joy Segal, CFLE , our co-founder and I have carefully documented the process of establishing this center. Information is available on audio-tape through the National Council on Family Relations and by contacting us at 312-573-4520, dmurphy@mail.latin.pvt.k12.il.us.

Conclusions and future directions

We know from the presenters at this conference that children and parents have complex needs. We also know that parent involvement is vital to children's success. This center has been designed with this in mind. To support us in our efforts those of us working to make this happen around the country have been meeting regularly as part of a parent education study group. Our first meetings have been primarily to look at the needs of the middle and upper class parents we serve. We are seeking to see how they are similar and different from other parents. Many of us have worked with at-risk children and families. We do believe that in this complex society all parents are at-risk when it comes to growing in their role, helping their children grow and fulfilling everyone's expectations of them. (See Kegan's description of the dynamic interaction of cultural demands and parent's mental capabilities). Some of the questions we hope to answer in the future are: What are the "felt needs" of the parents we serve? How do they match up with those the experts have identified? If parents look for isolated skills do we also feel the need to emphasize the ongoing, changing, adaptive, reflective nature of parenting that experts now describe as central? Are we as parent educators aware of the consciousness level of parents when they describe their children? Should we be? Do we feel as parent educators that it is our role to support parents through sometimes pushing their consciousness level, as well as that of teachers, employers, policy makers the media, etc.? We invite parent and family educators, theorists and researchers to explore these questions with us.